

# ayaskala

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*ayaskala*

October, 2020

Finding a Way

**Editor**

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*In This Issue –*

Aditi Bhattacharjee	1
George Sandifer-Smith	4
J. Archer Avary	6
Jaz Hurford	9
Marceline White	11
Maria S. Picone	13
s.parker	15
Sanjana Rajagopal	18
Trishita Das	20
Zarnab Tufail	21
Anannya Uberoi	22
Satyarth Pandita	24
Hannah Cajandig-Taylor	27
Juilee	29
Megha Nayar	32
Tristan Marajh	36
Shweta Ravi	39

**you are here but all I see is me slowing me down by Aditi Bhattacharjee**

for DK

I'd planned to clip my nails  
it's been 17 days since  
they are a healthy length of attractive now  
I'd rather put electric blue paint on them  
probably a first in decades  
everything takes time

these days, summer seconds slow silently -  
I struggle to get out of bed  
this lack of inertia makes my body sloppy  
I wash dishes at the sink ever wary of dropping some  
water the plants with a fear of over-feeding gnawing at the back of my mind  
stare at my cat waiting for treats, calculating how long it lasts  
look vacantly out the window, not a leaf flutters  
chai cup in one hand, a cigarette in another

this standstill breaks me into tears

there are only 11 smokes left  
there's whispers in text messages "This lockdown will extend"  
I cry and laugh at the stupidity and cruelty of it all  
Fridays melt into Mondays and each hour looks the same  
I take to making side braids, and contemplate cutting some of it off  
even baths are starting to be debated

a regular guilt trip looks like the  
9 unread books on my night-stand;  
that was not the plan.  
an amateur hand at journaling takes priority.  
what do they say? variety is the spice of life.  
new recipes are googled and tried.  
inceptions of poems are lost every day;

to call notes and make lists of things to hoard  
in lieu to this lockdown

acrylic paints are splattered across  
canvas boards bought on a whim 8 months ago, while  
cobwebs gather like conspirators in unsuspecting corners.  
this constant sanitizing is tiring.

everything takes time until it doesn't

my partner checks on my sanity out of the corner of his eye -  
offers his hands to iron out the tension off my back  
puts together midnight sandwiches in the kitchen,  
while I watch Modern Family to feel normal again.

Dei is another word for God that  
I learnt playing online Scrabble.  
is this obsession with word games  
part of being grown-up?

most days it's a stress fest inside my head  
from mulling over sales plans and life trajectories;  
equipped with the coping mechanism of a touch-me-not.  
but every once in a while, there's a late-night surprise,  
that tastes like cheese and salami  
on triangles of rationed over-priced bread  
over-crunched in the toaster  
and for what it's worth,  
at least the sleep's easy.

I should remember to thank you  
next time around.

## **ABOUT THE POET**

Aditi Bhattacharjee is a sales specialist by profession and a poet by passion. When not in her day job, she is found cooking love poems in her head, most of them happen in Bombay, where she lives with her cat, Pluto, a second-hand book family and a growing garlic garden. She is always wondering about things that no one finds worth wondering about like who invented the pillow and why even? or how much time is enough time? Did the ventilator come first or the window? Her works are upcoming in The Remington Review, The Banyan Review & elsewhere. Say hi @beingadtastic on Instagram.

*Afon Rhymini* by George Sandifer-Smith

The river, beside the train lines  
where speakers say 'This is a staff announcement'  
before garbling the rest of their verse, has grown  
important in persistent times, memory.

We spend our outdoor exercise hour mapping  
a square route angling back to a fence  
we can see the river through, murking beside  
released traffic, rare cars  
delivering medication or pizza.

The Rhydney River and Afon Rhymini begins  
its day, should rivers wish to measure themselves  
in hours and seconds like ours, passing glacial down  
to draw lines between Glamorgan and Monmouthshire  
until Victorian parishes were rendered  
in the Cardiff afterlife, running a capital  
towards the Severn Estuary. Cold water clarifies

and is neither Welsh nor English. We listen,  
a formerly-black body cleansed in the death  
of choking, dusty industries that fed a world.  
We don't see the trout now clearing  
the distance to the upper reaches.

## **ABOUT THE POET**

George Sandifer-Smith is a Welsh writer and lecturer. His poetry has appeared in various journals and magazines including *New Welsh Review*, *The Stockholm Review*, *The Lampeter Review*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Black Bough*, *The Daily Drunk*, *Melted Butter Magazine*, *Re:side*, and numerous anthologies including *Poems from Pembrokeshire* (Seren Books, 2019), *To The Sofa And Back Again* (Roath Writers Group, 2020), and *Hit Points* (Broken Sleep Books, 2021). In 2019, he was awarded a PhD in Creative Writing from Aberystwyth University, and he currently teaches at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. You can follow him on Twitter, where his handle is @SandiferSmith.



## What is the Light by J. Archer Avary

marooned on this throwback rock  
amongst swaying wheat-field waves of lavender  
alveoli tickled by these purifying vapours  
toxic city fumes exchanged for sweet pastels  
buoyant in cool chemical comfort

if the membrane is a metaphor then what is the light?

my eyes observe this world in miniature  
its denizens compelled by the instinctual whip  
living industriously they grope and fondle  
bombastic displays of incandescent vulgarity  
will to live is the strongest motivation

if the window is also a mirror then what is the light?

the burdensome illusion of meaning  
its reflection implies an impenetrable clarity  
but freedom is imprisonment in this hideous Fun House  
our distorted perceptions of work and value  
the difference in being alive and trying not to die

## One Leg to Stand On by J. Archer Avary

the seagull seeks no sympathy  
a hardscrabble existence becomes it  
the seagull seeks easy nourishment  
scraps of bread or discarded chips  
wise to the ways of lunch break takers  
it circles until it sees what it's after  
the reflection of the midday sun off  
the poet's foil-wrapped sandwich

there's no sympathy for the seagull  
the poet knows & loathes its motivation  
the seagull trains one eye on the harbour  
the other eye on the sandwich prize  
what the poet seeks is the unattainable  
the intangible imagery that reveals hidden  
truths in the mundane rhythms of life  
a spark of inspiration or a guiding star

the seagull is a desperate optimist only  
concerned with what's in the poet's hand  
the poet is oblivious to what is obviously  
the tortured protagonist of a future work  
not noticing its withered & mangled leg  
the useless appendage dangling limply  
the seagull is what the poet seeks but he  
doesn't know it, he finishes his sandwich

the seagull seeks no sympathy &  
the poet misses the metaphor of the moment  
a better poet might say something like this:  
the seagull accepts its handicap with dignity  
life is challenging enough in the best of times  
death comes for even the strongest among us  
so ride the currents where they take you  
one leg to stand on is better than no leg at all

## **ABOUT THE POET**

J. Archer Avary (he/him) is a former journalist and champion lionfish hunter. His work has appeared/is forthcoming in Stay Journal, The Remnant Archive, Melbourne Culture Corner, Rejection Letters and elsewhere. Born in Albuquerque, NM, J. Archer lived in several US cities including Omaha, NE and Atlanta, GA before leaving the states for the Cayman Islands in 2014. He quit journalism last year to focus on poetry and prose and now lives on a tiny island in the English Channel with his wife. Twitter: @j\_archer\_avary

## Channeling by Jaz Hurford

we sit and argue  
over the picayune  
ration of coruscate  
and colour  
you have for us,  
and I can't tell  
what you're after  
even in the cashmere  
feathers of down  
time; the heat  
in between.

we watch black  
and white cinema on TV  
and even in the  
absence of appellation  
I wail for with  
burnt tongue  
I tell you  
yes.

yes, our lives are taijitu,  
yes, I need your  
carapace over mine  
it fits utterly and in  
our united blood hoary  
pictures are crests  
of our touch

in a static slip  
of fate tacky  
fingerprints graze  
buttons arousing the  
room with conversation  
when we have none;

indeed, you are flat  
and grey like  
the channel with  
our favourite old  
movies on or  
the breath between  
England and France

but I love the  
way you  
turn us on.

### **ABOUT THE POET**

Jaz Hurford (she/her) is a lowly twenty-something flitting between jobs and writing in small spaces. She is currently living her best life as a content writer for BestGayLife. You'll find her behind the scenes of @BanditFiction on twitter or on her personal account @misshurf. Her most recent works can be found online in perhappened, The Daily Drunk, and Lucky Pierre Zine.

## Crossroads by Marceline White

At 40, I wrote that I  
was standing at  
the crossroads of  
madness and clarity  
looking for direction.

Now, I can tell you,  
That I am well and  
truly lost.

I am beyond redemption-  
Hell, I'm expired-do not  
redeem me. But, today  
I rage, I raze, I blaze an  
ash path. I have crossed  
The chasm of middle age  
on a bridge of regret.

I have bled the river dry.  
I have bled like a river.  
mopped the current  
like spilled milk. Spoiled  
Milk. Milked dry.  
Dried out. Dried up.

In Baltimore, once more, I sleep alone.  
I've often said "No" to simple pleasures  
And "Yes" to future tragedies  
in the smallest sense  
"bad men, no money, too much to drink".  
Rinse and repeat the cycle.

The personal is political  
and the political affects me personally.  
It is time to make sense of the chaos  
pick up the pieces, say "No More" to  
abusers, large and small.  
to join together with other crazy  
lunatics living on the fringe  
To make the margin the centre  
And to make the centre hold.

## **ABOUT THE POET**

Marceline White is a writer based in Baltimore, Maryland. She writes policy, prose, poems, essays, and plays. An artist and activist, Marceline's writing is forthcoming or has appeared in *The Copperfield Review*, *The Free State Review*, *The Loch Raven Review*, *The Shattered Wig Review*, anthologies including *Ancient Party: Collaborations in Baltimore, 2000-2010*, and *Life in Me Like Grass on Fire*. Essays, op-eds, and other writing has appeared in *Woman's Day*, *Baltimore Fishbowl*, *Baltimore Sun*, and *Mother Jones*.

<https://www.facebook.com/marceline.white> <https://twitter.com/marcelineawhite>

## **Biomat by Maria S. Picone**

Content Warning: cutting, mental health, chronic illness, oblique mention of pet sickness.

amethyst rocks my inflamed  
oscillating migraine  
stress-torn world-worn  
shoulders suffusing  
hope into my water glass  
stirred into complete dissolution by  
this scientific procedure to reduce  
inflammation developed in Korea  
as I am  
only a type of quartz not  
100% genuine Korean amethyst  
bought to pursue an impossible dream  
the sickly girl, her dying cat  
intending to heal  
here we nap a sapling kitten  
and I-my thoughts drift  
in my lower body  
heat spreads like  
sunshine spilling from within  
this amethyst veil of dreams



## **ABOUT THE POET**

Maria S. Picone (she/her/hers) writes, paints, and teaches from her home in South Carolina. Her writing has been published in *Kissing Dynamite*, *Ligeia*, and *Q/A Poetry*, among others. A Korean adoptee, Maria often explores themes of identity, exile, and social issues facing Asian Americans. She received an MFA in fiction from Goddard College and holds degrees in philosophy and political science. You can find more on her website, [mariaspicone.com](http://mariaspicone.com), or Twitter @mspicone.

"I've decided" by s.parker

*to write*

be.a.u.ti.ful poetry -  
it w/ill be  
raw and real -  
we.ather reality,  
im.a.gin.ed,  
or re:c.i.pro.cat[er]ed...

someday [after hesitation]  
[ceases] my words  
will  
melt man's he/art  
and I'll im.part hope  
for a future  
for even ex.change

n-ow  
held with/in  
words  
a.wait.ing re:cept.ion(s)  
of varying scope  
of varying degrees  
of relation.ships

take off  
crash down  
burn fuel  
stall engine  
rise again  
on eagle's wings  
flying as phoenix

*I am woo-man removing outer garb*

**A doc.u.ment.ED life by s.parker**

in.form(s) much  
brings outside  
audience in

An image  
allows me to imagine  
without you seeing reality  
I enter us into

A mirage  
A mirror  
this social media  
functioning  
as I put myself out there  
air, waves  
hoping not to be ground  
or set aflame

Knowing if you pick up  
thorns may pierce my flesh  
this rose blooms before you  
but remains wrapped in vines  
awaiting true love's kiss  
awaiting words sharp enough  
to cut chord to fantasy

I'm engaging reality  
with shows  
with screens  
without any sheen  
brows knitted  
hands knotted  
I owe no explanation  
but offer shared experience

within toppled towers  
ripples of matrix systems  
link us by algorithms  
we liken to stormy seas  
your eyes hold harbor

## **ABOUT THE POET**

s.parker breaks down words to build up meaning and understanding. You can find her @isparkit spinning phrases and associations.

## Hypnagogia by Sanjana Rajagopal

Content Warning: Mentions of Suicide, Anti-Depressant Use.

I collect the mini hotel notepads in Munich-*you know the ones*-  
hoping to covet the most debauched of hearts  
with a letter written by and by  
on snatches of paper & time between cities & rivers.

My psychiatrist practiced by the World Trade Center  
and before I left for Germany, he asked if I would kill myself  
while on vacation. I found the question absurd-  
suicide feels more foreign a concept than ever when I'm  
abroad and away from all the things that make me  
a risk to myself.

I only ever want to die when I look in the mirror and see a loser,  
when I listen to a Paramore song

When I recall  
harsh words exchanged over phone calls,  
deceptively tender moments,  
retracted sparks on a frigid bridge.

[ The psychiatrist, hearing my meekly rehearsed speech,  
prescribed an SSRI

-as if that would solve my Stockholm Syndrome adoration  
for a man who backed me into a corner  
and then decided he'd had enough of me  
enough religious transgression  
to whet his insatiable appetite

-as if that would solve my desperate attempts  
to read impossible love into lust

-as if that would stop me from neurotically scribbling  
that damned romantic letter on trains headed nowhere

-as if that would solve the later addition of another woman  
to the toxically dreadful equation of our entanglement]

When I return to  
my studio apartment in the States,  
a specialty cocktail of jet lag and Lexapro  
have me dancing on the thin line  
separating seductive sunrise and reality.

From my fire escape,  
I watch the movement of the minute hand  
color the sky blush pink.

When the Event  
is over, I climb back into my twin bed  
and draw my black Banana Republic coat  
with the big buttons and torn pockets  
over me, and almost fall over the rim

But something within me is holding on tight,  
as tigers and titanic waves  
try and swallow me whole-

and no matter how hypnotic and despotic the situation grows-  
I will not let go of my death grip on life.

## **ABOUT THE POET**

Sanjana Rajagopal is a graduate student studying philosophy in New York City. Her poems have appeared in Perhappened Mag, L'ephemere Review and Fordham University's Journal of Comparative Literature, Bricolage. You can find her on Twitter @SanjanaWrites, and on Instagram @astrangecharm.

## Myrtle by Trishita Das

if you are in search of life, you needn't look  
beyond my window, where the yellowing brick is overgrown  
with morning glory and begonias. I see the creepers  
clutching wrought iron grills to invent their own ladders,  
shoots and stems that teach me how to be peach-green and unapologetic.  
the starlight spills through the window, the moonlight silvers the leaves.  
my watering can see the roots and the soil swallow each other  
in endless hungry mouths. within the framed space of my window,  
life isn't in need of capturing, it is still.  
I am learning from the myrtle how to grow.

### ABOUT THE POET

Trishita Das (she/her) is a teacher and writer from Mumbai, India. Her poems explore the ideas of identity, sexuality, and mental health and archive everyday life. Her works have been featured in several publications including The Remnant Archive, Ang(st) Feminist Zine, Plum Tree Tavern and Free Verse Revolution. She also enjoys fluffy dogs, culinary experiments, and bathroom singing. Read more of her work on Instagram: @fine\_lined.

## **The rule book of how to be a woman: background by Zarnab Tufail**

my mother holds a cloth of leniency in one hand,  
the other hides the key to inside a chamber  
made of rules and regulations  
she says here's the key to the rule book of how to be a woman.  
my baby fat is yet to depart but I could not stop my endometrium from running  
away.  
somehow, it ends up being my fault  
the chicken I ate, how I sat, how I played.  
I had caused this early transition and I was bound to hate myself forever.

## **The rule book of how to be a woman: preface by Zarnab Tufail**

sometime between the bottom of the seven-story stairway and our apartment's door  
the word '*period*' changed its meaning and came pouring down.  
the city's sky didn't rain & I had no memories of rainfalls  
besides my mother's tears that led to my tears which led to my baby brother's  
a chain reaction, I did not understand the cause of.  
the city's heat wasn't kind & I had no familiarity with body shiverings  
airplanes flew over our roof every night causing airwaves to synchronize contractions  
with me  
my brother screamed because of loud noises while I begged my soul to leave this  
body.

### **ABOUT THE POET**

Zarnab Tufail is a Pakistani pre-medical student. She is the co-founder of The Walled City Journal and editor for The Lumiere Review. Her work can be found here: [zarnabtufail.wordpress.com](http://zarnabtufail.wordpress.com)



## Rose by Anannya Uberoi

Content Warning: Mentions of anxiety.

St. Magdalena

March 27, 2020

*"As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives."*

*Henry David Thoreau*

The hush of the mountain deafens us. The visiting cat leaves through the open shutter-he has places to be. We like to think he is better off in the wild woodlands, where the troubles of the mind subside. There is always the promise of thicker milk from other houses, and better still, the freedom to choose. Outside, rows of homesteads speck the grass-laden pathway with mounds of beige, rose, and white.

Inside, undone dishes rot upon the rocky shelf and washed nightgowns plug the vent with damp, ascending steam. A cupful of warm, condensed milk waits to be tossed into the bowl of beaten coffee. The disquiet in our mind lingers around the ruptured edges of terra-cotta cups and cracks on the timbered table.

Now, we are thinking about home - the dirt, the clutter, the completeness of it. The more we forbear from the crippling anxiety that washed the walls of our room blue-black, the more it chases us to our makeshift camps in hidden parts of the world. We are also revisiting the aftermath of bad decisions, the breaking apart from routine, and the roads to spiritual health that follow. Here and now is a cathartic release retreat into the wilds and wastes that connect us to the enterprise of our indomitable spirit.

We will dust the cups until they slip and fall, and form them again on the pottery wheel. We will wake up to the sound of deep listening and quiet awareness until our empathy for the jagged Alps echoes back to us. We will tar the walls in the evenings and paint them raspberry red at dawn until the sickness is scrubbed clean and washed away in the Santo Lake.

The Victorian clock on the wall loses time, trying its last run before it stops the end of an era. Tomorrow, there will be therapy. There will be more grass to walk on, more bells to ring, more mental blocks to conquer. Today, we open up a bottle of Santi Infinito the kind landlady left us in the kitchenette. Wild cherry, strawberries, and ripe grape linger in our mouths. We can almost sense a more pleasant home warming up the pastures from two blocks away.

Pour yourself a cup. Yes, now.

Hold it to the late afternoon sky.

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Anannya Uberoi is a full-time software engineer and part-time tea connoisseur based in Madrid. She is the poetry editor at The Bookends Review, the winner of the 6th Singapore Poetry Contest and a Best of Net nominee. An avid traveller, she has extensively toured the Himalayas of Northern India, Bhutan and Nepal. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Birmingham Arts Journal, The Indianapolis Review, The Bangalore Review, Buddhist Poetry Review, and The Madras Courier. [www.anannyauberoi.com](http://www.anannyauberoi.com), Twitter @AnannyaUberoi.

## Dear diary by Satyarth Pandita

In the darkest hour of the night, amidst the shrill cries and yells, the last caravan took off to an unknown destination. A chain of trucks and cars followed each other like ants following the trail of pheromones left behind by leading ants. The scent that each unit of this caravan emitted was of fear and horror. Inside the womb of these mechanical travellers were people, cattle, furniture, books and memories that formed the central part of the smuggling paraphernalia. The caravan passed through the tunnels, over the bridges, along the rivers, and beside the rocks. People remained in the murk, not knowing when the night gave over to the daylight. The tarpaulin cover of the vehicles kept them aloof from the outside world. After an exhausting journey preceded by the mental trauma of the events, the caravan came to a halt.

Sunlight greeted the beings when someone lifted the tarpaulin cover of the truck from outside. They deboarded the vehicles. The sunlight of the day was appealing at that time of cold winters. It infused life in lifeless beings. A small boy deboarded the truck at last whose face was dirty and bruised and his clothes tattered. A man helped the boy come out of the truck. The boy saw before him a throng of people, his people. The swarm of people brought the image of a giant beehive that he had seen back in his home. There were camps set all around the place. People were looking for their lost ones. Some met their relatives who had fled earlier, whereas others could not make it. The boy did not look out for anyone. He had witnessed the moments of his parents' final destination.

The place bore a stench which was inconceivable to mankind. It reeked of urine, and the droppings of the cattle enhanced the stench. People stank of sweat and dirty clothes. The boy made his way through the rows and columns of the puny canvas tents, like a rat in an underground tunnel looking for a way out. Old folks kept themselves busy with wailings and their hubble-bubble. As the sun of this place struck noon, the food-distributing volunteers showed up. The people rushed to get their hands on whatever that could keep them alive for the day. The families who owned the apple orchards now found solace in the rotten lots, as long as it kept them going. Among the big and sturdy build people, the small boy failed to secure food for himself. He sat at one corner on his haunches, watching people munch like cows. The agonizing cries of hunger forced him to steal the food from a tent whose

inhabitants lay asleep. An amateur that he was, he got caught by a man who happened to enter the tent during his act. The boy got frightened by seeing the man. He was tall and good looking with a peculiar nose and dark moustache that complimented his persona.

"Never steal, boy", the man said in a solemn voice.

The boy could not utter a word out of sheer fear and guilt. The man then handed out some fruits to the boy and asked him to visit the nearby field the next morning.

Day gave over to the night, and the boy gazed at the twinkling stars. He wondered if the stars were twinkling or shivering just like his parents had shivered till they did no more. He looked up and questioned the presence of the supreme being who watched it all and still chose to remain silent.

Next morning, the boy along with the other boys of the neighbourhood gathered in a small cobbled field. The boy sat cross-legged as did the others.

The man with a peculiar nose and thick moustache, better known as Masterji appeared with a black chart paper and white chalk box. He taught the kids and boys of the camps, so they didn't turn to wrongdoings.

The radiance of the glowing sun lit his face. It lent enchanting charisma to him. Masterji began with a monologue.

"You all are the torch bearers of our community. You all have survived the mayhem. Some of you have also lost your friends and families. You have lost your possessions, but you all possess the greatest wealth of wisdom. And only by education can you all know the true worth of your possession. 'They' chose the arms against us, but we shall choose the weapon of the wise."

Masterji took a ballpoint pen out of his pocket and raised it to the crowd.

"This shall be our weapon. We all will begin from today writing a journal entry of the events of the past and the struggles of our life. We won't let the darkness of that night deprive us of our identity. People will hear about us. Who we were and what became of us? You all possess the potential to grow into truly great people. Let each of your diaries be a source of hope, inspiration, dream and ambition for others. You all shall see yourself grow with the growth of your writing. Don't worry if now the people don't listen to your voices and pleas because you all will have your diary ever ready to

accept anything or everything that you have to say. Let your fear, sadness, joy and questions reflect in your writings. Don't let yourself get trapped in the web of hate and anger, rather try to turn the negative experience into a positive aspect of life because 'it is not what happens to us that matters, but how we deal with it'."

"Remember", masterji continued. "A poet once said 'I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.'"

After the speech concluded, Masterji handed over paper and pencil to the small crowd. The boys had found a new friend, a new hope.

They held their weapons in hand and wrote on top of the page 'Dear Diary'.

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Satyarth Pandita is a BS-MS undergraduate student at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Bhopal. He is doing his major in Biological Sciences. He has a keen interest in science, literature and cinema. For him, the journey of writing began with sending short stories and paintings to 'Springer'(Monthly Children's Magazine) and now many of his short stories, essays and articles have been published in state newspaper like 'Daily Excelsior', and in 'Kitaab' magazine. He keeps posting his write-ups on his blog [panditasatyarth.wordpress.com](http://panditasatyarth.wordpress.com). Follow Satyarth on X: @panditasatyarth

## Self Portrait as Nancy Drew by Hannah Cajandig-Taylor

I am twenty-three when I picture Nancy Drew watching Jaws at a drive-in, dark cyanotype of a tulip paperclipped to the sun visor, staring out the driver's side, arm resting on the sill. Lately, windows look more like mirrors. Nancy & I are both looking for clues. For a culprit. I know this because of her underrated computer game franchise. When I am Nancy & she is me, we take note of important facts: That the Mayans used umbrellas. Writing words for someone else turns you into a ghost. Clouds are only white because they reflect sunlight. Zippers did not exist until 1993.

When Nancy placates the criminal mastermind in Venice, she's wearing a feather boa with brand-new Mary Janes. Doesn't fear the masked man running his index finger along a stack of Scopa cards. Swims in the canals. Sometimes, she looks across the water & pretends there's nothing on the other side. Van-sized sturgeon darting through glass waves. Other impossible things. I am twenty-three when retracing the steps of Nancy's first case: The Secret of The Old Clock, in which everything is *swell* & Nancy is *the bees knees*, searching for the jewellery of a dead woman to help her distraught daughter. It is 1930. The Lilac Inn depends on her wits. She's never solved a case before, but *who knows, maybe she'll be good at it*. Her father, Carson Drew, is a lawyer. The Great Depression didn't change Nancy's life much. His business was *just keen*, as the lopsided banker puts it. This puts Nancy at the ripe age of 108 if she was eighteen when driving the Iris blue cruiser around the dirt roads of Titusville. Correction: she would be 108.

She never ages. I am growing both younger & older, constantly looking for the answer to a case I wasn't assigned. The gyroscope in the wall. A glass gear in a hidden passageway. How are we supposed to deconstruct the mystery when sharks & sharp-tongued men & airtight chambers lurk in the foreground. When the closest thing to resolve is knowing the suspect has been temporarily apprehended. When I can't tell the difference between observations & excuses & distract myself with numbered lists of details disguised as possibilities.

When the screen cuts black before the unending.

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Hannah Cajandig-Taylor is a poet & flash writer residing in the Upper Peninsula, where she reads for Passages North & Fractured Lit. Her work is forthcoming in journals like Milk Candy Review, Sidereal Magazine, Waxwing, & Sonora Review, among others. She has been nominated for a Best Small Fictions award & still plays Nancy Drew games on her computer. Her debut chapbook ROMANTIC PORTRAIT OF A NATURAL DISASTER will be released through Finishing Line Press this winter. Find her on twitter @hannahcajandigt.

## Metamorphosis by Juilee

Content Warning: Possible symptoms of abusive behaviour.

By eleven, I was convinced that I knew everything better than my mother. When to forgive, when to sigh, how to sympathise, what to be upset about, what to yell or remain silent about. All of it.

As I grew older, my face, despite its minor structural change from when I slammed my chin on an iron cot, came to resemble hers. Not similar to when she was my age, but if we sat before the mirror together as she oiled my hair, the twenty-five years between us ceased to exist. I had absorbed her entire existence and become both of us.

We shared a migraine disorder and a high pain tolerance, thick black hair and wide hips that run in her family, the subconscious reaching out for chikankari when shopping, a love for the Pakeezah soundtrack, the craving for our second cup of tea exactly at noon.

I heard my accent morph into hers whenever I raised my voice and stopped yelling. I learned that her anger in tense situations was actually fear when I felt it myself. I didn't realise she never apologised after speaking without thinking until I taught myself to hold my tongue. It took me years to learn that she was projecting but not before finding a way to blame myself every time she did.

I became her chronic backache with my distaste for physical activity. Her sweet tooth and my near-intolerance for sugar. Her passive-aggression as her defence mechanism and my newfound faith in breathing exercises.

With time I grew aware. I was both of us, yes, for all I ever knew of me came from her. I loved her so much. Only there existed a gap the size of an 'I'm not entirely okay' between us.

I was scared of her, angry too. But I stopped asking questions that aggravated her. I stopped taking names she couldn't bear to hear. I stopped demanding help but silently hoped for it. I learned to keep my distance.



Through this my mother held on to this distance as well. Blamed me for it. In silence, but not quietly. She worked harder on the days I slept in. Placed the dishes on the rack with a heavy thud, folded my clothes slamming them on top of the stack so they bounced and fell over. The poor refrigerator door was shut too hard because I forgot to put leftovers in one night. Loud sighs every time I chopped vegetables too slow which is not too slow in general terms. The anger in her words so searing hot, I'd preferred a punishment. But even as a child, in that little gap lay a truth I was aware of but didn't believe: her behaviour didn't come from me. Like my hurt stemmed from my mother before me, hers must have come from those before her too.

So I went looking for my mother's gardens, found it overgrown and toxic. It held our recipes using coconut in cooking meat, our traditions of filling the belly of a quilt with a piece of bhakari in its centre to ensure a lifetime of warmth, in grind-mill overs. In zari-padar saris, in the many processes of homemade chilli powder and mango pickle, in the habit of never asking for help, in a heritage that rooted self-worth in valuing labour over the person. We may have progressed, moved on, left our old homes, gone away to college, married by choice, but not healed. These histories held us hostage between the traumas of patriarchy, poverty, injustice, and as often flashed in my mother's face in the second before it softened into a defeated sigh, rage.

How could I possibly ask my mother to relinquish all of this and find time to take care of three dependents while loving herself and not projecting anything onto us and also not discussing it with us because it made us uncomfortable?

My mother carried that garden in her marrow. She didn't ask why. She didn't ask how long for. She didn't ask if she could ever stop. I feared I would have to carry it for her. I feared I would agree to.

I knew I didn't want to. The distance grew as I turned to the outside of the two of us. There, for every good friend, I met a bigoted teacher, for every kind lady on the train, a creep on the station. For every joyous job, a terrible work environment. For every calm night stroll, a fear of darkness. I also found help, I went to therapy. I realised how silent I had been. I read about women like me from times long before mine, I read about mothers and daughters and sisters. For the first time I spoke to my friends who, for the first time too, spoke to me about how we didn't want to become our mothers.

In everything I sought and found, was empathy - the emergency brake to the historical and hysterical cycle of our combined trauma as silenced women.

I couldn't ask my mother to just become okay.

So I asked her if she'd like to get ice-cream with me. I took her on lunch dates. I told her that I am willing to listen to her, that if she spoke, all that she carried might not feel so heavy. I made our afternoon tea, I helped her make a meal plan, I cleaned the bathrooms on weekends, I let her sleep in my bed.

I asked that she forgive me for the days I couldn't keep promises, that she understand I cannot always listen to her and might need her to listen to me, that I will not oil my hair if she doesn't. I asked her to remember I am an entirely new twenty-five-year-old woman now. I asked if a bascule bridge could be built on the distance between us. I asked that my garden is left alone.

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Juilee is a Master's student and lover of reading books and eating on public transport. She writes short stories and poetry. Follow her on Instagram @juilee\_k

## The exit protocol by Megha Nayar

Now that you've made up your mind to leave and picked next Friday as D-Day, you must start preparing a checklist. Do not, however, use a scribble pad or make notes on your phone. Create a new email ID instead and save your list as a draft. Remain incognito and log out after every modification. He often skims through your phone. If he chances upon any evidence of your impending escape, it'll be the end of you.

The most important thing you must smuggle out is your documents - your school leaving certificates, college mark sheets, employment offers, resignation letters, and salary slips. Your father had meticulously filed these in a brown folder over the first two decades of your life. Don't forget that, because those two decades are all you have now.

Pick that folder last though, just before you exit, not any earlier. It sits on the middle shelf of the study cupboard. He must not notice its disappearance.

You will be tempted to take every single garment, handbag and pair of shoes you love. But let's be practical - the next few months, all you will be doing is ruminating indoors or appearing for interviews. So, pack strictly neutral clothes. Pick the versatile ones especially - black trousers, leggings in basic colours, plain shirts. Of your purses, take one small and one big one. To save space, put the small one inside the big one. Leave your high heels and flip-flops behind. Take your multi-purpose black shoes instead, and wear your best pair of sandals on your way out.

Don't fret over socks, night clothes, or underwear. That stuff will find its way to you eventually. A man, even one livid from rejection, will see no point in holding on to your lingerie.

Next, your books. Leave them all behind. Well, maybe take *The Palace of Illusions* but forget the rest. It will break your heart but this is an inescapable loss. They're too heavy to be lugged home.

Anyway, he doesn't read. He will certainly not burn them. At most, he might donate them to a library out of spite, which is fine because you've read them all. Take that risk.

What about your jewellery? Segregate it into three categories: precious, semi-precious and trinkets. Where you're not sure, ask your mother during a routine conversation, in a by-the-way manner. Like, "Oh hey, speaking of shopping, Mum, do you remember that rose-shaped brooch we bought together for my wedding? Was it real gold?" She will remember. Mothers are connoisseurs of metals. Mothers are also creatures of instinct but, so be careful to watch the tone of your voice. Don't sniffle or speak at a different pitch than usual. If she suspects anything, distract her with counter-questions, like you've been doing the past few months.

Take the good stuff. Leave the cheap baubles behind. Not everything pretty is valuable. But you already know that by now.

Which suitcase will you pick? Take the big grey one. It's brand-new, unblemished by bad memories. Do not pack it right away though. Just keep your stuff ready. You can toss it all in on the morning of D-Day.

Now for the bookings. The 17:20 PM flight is the best option. You'll have to leave three hours before its scheduled departure, around 2 in the afternoon. This is providential timing. You've observed over the past four weeks that he is properly drowsy around that time, knackered by the summer heat. Your cooking can help. If you prepare an extra heavy meal, complete with dessert, he will likely retire for a snooze, shutting the bedroom door to keep the air-conditioning in. It's just what you need to make an inconspicuous exit.

What about money? You've never been allowed to have any of your own. All your government-mandated identity proofs are in his custody too. Now, this is going to take an elaborate scheme.

Early next week, when he is in a good mood, show him the brochure of a distance-learning ELT programme. Tell him this course will help you find a job teaching English online. Since you can do this without stepping out of the house, he won't forbid it. Tell him animatedly about its contents and request him to help you fill the admission form, so he is convinced of your interest in the course. Mention casually that you will need to send them attested photocopies of your passport and PAN card for documentation, along with a copy of the electricity bill as evidence of permanent address. Since you don't have a printer scanner at home, you will have to step out for the printouts. Do this on the morning of D-Day, around 9 AM, when he is getting ready for work. Tell him you completely forgot that the admission deadline is today,

so you need your original documents pronto. He will curse you and declare you a moron for being unorganised, then instruct you to keep the originals back in his study when done. Nod yes, vigorously. Don't do it though. Put them in your handbag once he's gone.

After he reaches the office, call him up pretending to be at the photocopiers. Sound breathless. Tell him you need an urgent money transfer because you have to pay the first instalment of fees before noon. Ask for fifteen thousand rupees. He will get annoyed and cuss at you, but eventually send the money without further ado. Fifteen thousand is the right sort of amount, not big enough for him to launch an investigation but good enough to fund your escape. Besides, he has a meeting with wholesalers that Friday morning. It's why you even selected that day. He will be terribly busy. He will forget to ask you to e-mail him a copy of the receipt.

As soon as you receive the money, book the ticket. Hopefully the flight won't be full by then. Pull the chosen suitcase out of the attic, toss in all your stuff, then head to the kitchen to perform your wifely duties one last time.

When he gets home at 12:30 PM, open the door with a wide smile. Disarm him before he has a chance to unleash his inner detective. Thank him for the money and show him the feast of gratitude you've rustled up. Lay out his plate with abundance. Feed him generously. A sleeping pill can also do the job of seducing him into a siesta but you're a woman of ethics. When you've never played dirty, why succumb on the last day?

When he's washing up post-lunch, put his phone on mute and slide it out of sight. Softly suggest that he take a nap, considering what a long week it's been. He will agree. Wait for him to recede to the bedroom, for the door to click shut, for the confirmation of his snores. Gently bolt the door from outside. Now, quickly retrieve the suitcase. Change into your happy, non-wife clothes. Check that your handbag has your phone, debit card, papers. Book a cab. On the way out, don't forget to grab the brown folder from the study - it's the foundation stone on which you're going to rebuild your life.

When the entire human race is in peril of being obliterated by a rogue microbe, why must a perfectly capable woman spend the precious remainder of her existence shackled by this small man and his small mind?

As the taxi pulls in, lock the main door behind you. Walk out without turning around for a last look. Know that by the time he manages to break out of this prison, you'll be safely airborne.

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Megha Nayar was longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2020. She spends half her time teaching French and English. The other half, she devotes to learning Spanish, taking long walks, and pondering the purpose of human existence. Writing is her validation and catharsis, not to mention regular dopamine fix. She blogs at [meghanayar.tumblr.com](https://meghanayar.tumblr.com) and tweets at @meghasnatter.

## Saint Elena of Johnny's Hamburgers by Tristan Marajh

Elena worked cash at Johnny's Hamburgers, having declined high school for the time being. She took orders, replaced condiments, and cleared tables. One slow Saturday night, in the walk-in freezer, her ambiguous dynamic with Brandon the cook resulted in an ambiguous pregnancy: the father didn't have to be Brandon, it might have been Caesar the burger-flipper, who, to his merit, lasted longer at Johnny's than Brandon after she told them about her pregnancy.

Elena had that job for three years. She was nineteen now. People gave her pitiful, patronizing looks as her protruding tummy could no longer be concealed by her work apron. Never mind *those* people's tummies protruded because of deep-fried food and fatty burger consumption - at least hers was *nurturing* life instead of destroying it. At nights, though, she did feel that life was destroying *her*: she'd be hunched over the toilet bowl, retching but bringing up nothing. In the shower - that moment that had changed it all - she had curled up into herself as water rained down on her and pain wracked her insides. Her life and how she saw herself broiled in her mind: minimum-wage worker, pregnant, uneducated, unmarried, on welfare; all the signs of a life ruined before it even began.

Lying on the shower floor, Elena felt no escape. She'd always been impulsive: disdain for high school, eagerness instead to earn money and a lazy laidback-ness that the wrong people found seducible. For the first forced time, Elena faced who she was. That realization, at first a sliver of a thought, immediately roused a raging tsunami of understanding from a submerged lake of wisdom within; entering and filling every crack and corner of her broken body and spirit, rendering her just able to turn off the faucet before falling into a profound sleep, wet and naked, right there on the shower floor.

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When Elena woke up, everything in her tiny bathroom seemed to be brimming with a pristine, holy light: the soap dish, her toothbrush and lotion bottles, the very rust on the sink. Sunlight streamed through the tiny window; it felt like love, purity, the Holy Spirit itself. It was her life's first certainty: that the only feeling she now felt wholeheartedly at peace with was an out-of-body one. She'd previously planned

errands to run that day, but instead remained in her apartment the entire weekend in a state of deep peace and joy as everything around her sang the song of Life.

At work, Elena's Manager commented she was "graceful" and so at ease, unlike he'd ever seen before. Their hippie customer who got vegetarian burgers said Elena was the embodiment of Presence, of Zen. *That's what it was*, Elena knew, remembering her experience after awakening from the shower floor. She perceived her surroundings as she did then because all the thoughts that occupied her identity before were then known for exactly what they were and when they fell away, she was left with the present moment, the holy, pristine Now. It's what Hindus and Buddhists refer to as *enlightenment*; what Jesus refers to as the kingdom of Heaven, or *salvation* and indeed, Elena was now intrinsically aware of exactly what was meant. There was no better descriptor than the experience Itself. Those religious paths were different but they led to the same place, not one in the sky but within the spirit.

Unaware of the impact her transformation would have on her wider community, Elena remained focused on maintaining her enlightened perspective throughout the day. She was still human, after all, prone to the same falterings that led her astray before. The pregnancy progressed, delivery succeeded, and Elena's son bore witness to the sort of prophetess his mother eventually became. Elena gave lectures at new-mother groups, daycare centres, play dates, PTA meetings, community centre gatherings, little-league sports events, and library Storytimes. Attendees were mothers themselves like Elena: struggling with parenthood, isolation, stress and financial difficulties and poor decisions. The women longed for peace and transcendence and Elena through her wisdom taught them how to achieve those states, the essential lesson being that one is no longer one's past or current circumstances, not even their thoughts (the hardest to disbelieve). In a sense, Elena was a new kind of prophet; a prophetess, neither male nor virgin, not even the channel through which a Higher Power sent Its son into the world. Her wisdom empowered women to in turn empower their own children to become little gods themselves: their own source of power, peace and strength, an immaculate conception of how life should be lived on the Earth. And at the end of the day, there will still be chores to do, homework to help with, and errands to run. Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.



## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

With a childhood spent in Trinidad & Tobago, Tristan Marajh resides in Toronto. His prize-winning *The Complete Works of Min-Ju Kim*, a tale about trial through and triumph over depression, can be found [here](#).

## **Penned down the Penned-Up Bit by Shweta Ravi**

Dear Aldabra,

(the tortoise who so kindly lent me the semblance of his shell)

To forget is to not remember. To not remember is to accept the erasure of splits in my tectonic plates that once curved apart to carve my today. I feel befriended in my yearnings with your amazing knack of picking the tiniest flinch and sound off the earth's crust (without ears!) and coupling them into cosmic wisdom. Perhaps the past is a distress message once sealed in the old beer bottle tossed into the sea, catching up with us every now and then on diverse shores.

In an early fear-tainted phase of my life, anxiety and panic bumped into me. Vulnerability in the wrong hands turns into a temptation. They conspired to sell me off an elopement package with loneliness and there, I landed at your door, a bundle of contradictions since I wasn't born one of joy. Joy feels safe. Contradiction is a double-edged sword, its flailing arm hurting itself and others in the relentless quest for an amorphous scabbard. A fragile me with an agile loneliness hastily squeezed through the mottled brown carapace into the large-heartedness of your shell. The shell was a nest I came bolting back to, away from the world's din and clatter to give vent to another incongruous sound, the sound of my own voice. I sought the shell to elude adjectives of judgment. The more I surpassed courtesy in extending my stay in your shell, the deeper I shrunk into it. Loneliness bloated. Time raced on with ten-speed gears until loneliness became excruciating as pain yet as indispensable as air.

Losing and finding myself in exile have been milestones. I have plummeted like Alice, soared like a phoenix and in the interlude, clung to moments of sangfroid to move from being wounded to wise. I talked things out with loneliness. It said it was there to protect me including protecting me from itself. I have now become more accustomed to be seen unapologetically walking mostly alone, talking nothing when there is nothing to talk or not playing someone else to be with everyone else. To be like others is to not be what I am.

When connectivity is less inside my shell, I try to forge connections. There's no rush hour here. There's ample time to watch life looming large in the littleness of the roadside lantanas, merge with the song and soul of a random sparrow and admire it

splitting into lines and patterns in the sky that never become boundaries. On cemented walls, I have met the most loyal friends in lizards and the prettiest ones in ladybirds who I idly imagine must have insisted on being frocked in those black polka-dotted reds by God.

If the entrapment in loneliness is mine, I own the space too. In it, I have often let the past little me slide out of my silhouette and get some fresh air like we do to a scar. But like a spell detonated too soon, she recoils faster into the past than I do in the present. The demons who nailed her coffin then returned in self-righteous disguises to nail my coffin now, by pointing out at my mental ineptness through a salvo of unsolicited Whatsapp sermons about how the wrong done with us is insignificant, how we react to it is what matters. I'm glad this time I'm there to stand by my little me, to tell her not to bother, to tell her that this world abounds with insensitive idiots and I would never blame her for not comprehending the laws of action and reaction when she was just nine.

That little me never wanted to be a teacher. She wanted to be bigger things, perhaps a manifestation beyond anyone's grip that dared to squish her self-esteem into another pulp. Eventually, I not only found the 'big' bits of me ingrained in my students in the strength and creativity I was able to foster in them over the years but also discovered an implicit purpose in the immensity of this role life chose for me. I have begun to harness my loneliness to discern such wrestling emotions on my students' faces, subconsciously trying to see more than what is being shown. It could be a silent rebellion or a stifled scream being lulled and held before a storm. I engage with them in the common terrain we share, not by posing questions to render them an outcast or offering answers that engender the feelings of a victim but reassuring them that they aren't the sole inhabitants here and surely not in hell. In recognizing their fragmentation is determining their totality.

Do I dwell in a contorted alternate universe, I wonder. The paradox of reality intrigues me. Don't most inhabitants themselves of this stereotypically sane world want their reality to be otherwise?

I'm doing fine sticking to my reality living a sanity which is the sum total of tons of madness I don't feel the need to justify. Each day I navigate through the fullness and half-ness of my being to discover some wholeness. Each day, I believe there is more in the world to love than hate. Thank you, Aldabra for always being there and not just

because you are a slow-paced tortoise. I know if you find me in pain again, you will share your home and if you have no home, you will share my pain.

Your pain in the neck (guilty of overshooting my stay in your shell into which you found no space to retract your head).

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Shweta Ravi is a writer and educationist. She's lured by both- the simple and the spell-binding to carve her imaginative clay. Her work mostly focuses on the intersection of ecology and literature. Her pieces have appeared in print and online journals like Teachers' Plus, Active Muse, Commonwealth Writers (Stories to Connect Us) and Women's Web. <http://twitter.com/Shweta98929210>

